

The Brevity  
Galatians 3:23-4:7  
Luke 2:22-40

“But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that they might receive adoption as children.”

“It was an unlikely place to be at 4:30 a.m.” begins physicist Brian Greene, “since I’m not much on celebrations and take minimal notice of most every holiday. Yet, a few years back, on a rainy December 31 morning,” Greene recalls looking up at a giant screen in Times Square, “together with a handful of other early revelers, awaiting images...of festivities on Kiribati, the first inhabited place on earth to welcome the new year. I was,” he reports, “as I recognized through the fog of exhaustion and the hazy steam billowing from manhole covers, re-enacting a struggle I’d been engaged in for decades.” Greene’s struggle, and ours on the first morning of the new year, is with time itself.

Old-timers in this sanctuary (that is to say, those of us intimidated by Blackberries and the like) will mark the new year by taking down a tattered calendar from the kitchen wall, its days filled with doctors’ appointments and business engagements, lunch meetings and dinner dates, the children’s birthdays alongside the funeral of an old friend, parties and play dates, deadlines and destinations. The anticipated, once again, has become the remembered; events recorded in red, blue and black ink that sometimes were reason enough to get up in the morning are now, at a glance, names and places that evoke an irretrievable past. This about-to-be recycled paper is an unwelcome reminder: the remainder of our human existence has been shortened by 365 days. The brevity!

In its place, we tack up future time: twelve more months “if we are lucky”, accompanied by pictures of Scottish terrier puppies, in my case, or sailboats or historic Philadelphia or self-

published collages of the family. Blank white squares stare back at us. A *new* year, we think: maybe our best...maybe our last. We pencil in the few things we know we have to do, the places we already are expected to be, the names of those whose paths will cross ours in the days that stretch before us, even as we watch the precious minutes of the first day of the year silently slip through our consciousness. When evangelist Billy Graham was asked, in 1997, what in his life had surprised him most, he replied, “The brevity of it!”

“Time dominates experience,” Greene goes on to observe. “We live by watch and calendar....We uproariously celebrate particular moments in time even as we quietly despair of its passage.” In this way, we are Newtonians who think time flows in one direction, “equably” in Newton’s words, “without reference to anything external”. It is as though “the universe [were] equipped with a kind of built-in clock that ticks off seconds identically, regardless of location or epoch. This is the intuitive perspective on time,” says Greene, the time counted in days crossed off the calendar and in years added up that will lead all flesh, inexorably, to the grave.

That clock had been ticking and ticking and ticking as Old Simeon and Anna waited in time to see their salvation: to see the Lord’s Messiah, the child who would signal the redemption of Jerusalem. For them, time itself led to his birth. Simeon had been told that he would not taste death until he saw the Lord’s Messiah. Anna’s eighty-four years, likewise, were spent fasting and praying, night and day, waiting for one moment in time to arrive. “At that moment” Luke writes, when Joseph and Mary appeared in the temple cradling an infant of eight days, Anna praises God and begins to speak of what she has seen, while Simeon sings, “Lord now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word, for mine eyes have seen thy salvation....” What did they see?

What they saw, initially, was the brevity of their own human existence assumed by God

in this child. What they saw, to borrow the words of T.S. Eliot from *The Journey of the Magi*, was “birth and death.” “...this birth was hard and bitter agony for us,” intuited Eliot’s king, “like death, our death.” But much more than human intuition caused Simeon to sing that day. On the eighth day of Jesus’ human existence, Jesus’ death was evident. In our text, Luke telescopes three rites--the rite of circumcision, of purification and of redemption--into this one moment, so that Simeon might notice the absence of the rite of redemption, a rite reserved for the firstborn son. The payment that was to act as a substitute for the sacrifice of the firstborn was missing. In other words, here in human flesh *was* the sacrifice, the one of whom Isaiah spoke: “wounded for our transgressions, bruised for our iniquities, upon him was the chastisement that made us whole, and by his stripes we are healed.” “This child is destined,” says Simeon to his mother, “for the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed....”

From the beginning Luke tells us of the end, of God’s firstborn Son offered up on the cross as a sacrifice. But notice, as well, that this is not a sacrifice *to* God made by a human being in payment for sins. Rather the sacrifice will be made by God’s: God is sacrificing his Son for us: “a light for revelation to the Gentiles” sings Simeon, “and a glory to your people Israel”. God has sent the Son into the world, into time, into the brevity of mortal life, so that, from the perspective of his rising, we might see in his life and in his death, God with us. What Simeon and Anna saw, initially, was the brevity of their own human existence assumed by God in this child. Therefore, says Karl Barth, “Our present is indeed joyful, for in it, since God is [the One] who is primarily and properly present, even in our weakness and stupidity, even in our missing or misusing of what is offered, we are not abandoned by [God] or left to ourselves...but may always count on the fact that the first and final responsibility for us is in [God’s] hands, that [God] forgives sins, protects erring children and causes tired wayfarers to take their halting steps,

that [God's] wisdom exceeds our folly and [God's] goodness our evil, that [God] is wakeful even though we fall asleep and dream about the past and the future when we ought to be buying up the Now which will never come our way again.”

But Simeon and Anna saw more in that moment than time, as we know it, could finally contain. If we return to Brian Greene's struggle with time itself, we are invited to inhabit a radically different understanding of time discovered by Albert Einstein. Einstein proved that what constitutes a moment in time is completely subjective. For instance, if you were not in this sanctuary, but ten light years away from me, moving at 9.5 miles an hour, “what you consider to have happened just now on earth would include events that I had experienced about four seconds later or earlier (your motion being toward or away from earth). If you were 10 billion light years away, the time discrepancy would jump to about 141 years,” meaning right now, you either would see the Great Chicago Fire of 1871 or hear the inaugural address of the president elect in 2153.

“In a very specific way, then,” says Greene, “this realization shatters our comfortable sense that the past is gone, the future is yet to be and the present is what truly exists.” Einstein's radically different understanding of time led him to write a condolence letter to the widow of his longtime friend and colleague Michele Besso, saying, “In quitting this strange world he has once again preceded me by just a little. That doesn't mean anything. For we convinced physicists, the distinction between past, present, and future is only an illusion, however persistent.” Moreover, when quantum mechanics is combined with Einstein's general theory of relativity, as scientists are on the verge of doing according to recent headlines, they believe this will compel them to “trade the space-time matrix, within which they have worked for centuries, for a more basic ‘realm’ that is itself devoid of time and space...where left/right, backward/forward, up/down and

before/after become meaningless.”

Were we, in the same breath, to speak of the “realm of God”, of the eternity that is God, then, in a very similar way, the sequential would give way to the simultaneity of eternity that sees not the frames of our broken existence, but sees us whole and wholly ourselves. I cannot help but think this is the more that Simeon saw when he sang that he had seen his salvation. He both saw himself whole--wholly human--in the child and he also beheld eternity in time. To borrow the words of Paul, *when the fullness of time had come*, when the eternal entered the temporal, when eternity entered time, Simeon beheld the God who had time for him. So Barth writes, “God would not be my God if He were only eternal in Himself, if He had not time for me. That He loves and elects me, that He wills and intends me, that He calls, judges, punishes, accepts, delivers, preserves and rules, me, that He is my Light, my Commander, my Succour, my Comfort and my Hope—all this is history, and has its time, and refers to me...[Now and]...in God’s eternity before I was and when I shall have ceased to be.”

In the fullness of time, the God who created time and the God who has given us time, enters time in Jesus Christ. And because, in him, we may see ourselves redeemed, see ourselves wholly ourselves, see creation finished in him, no longer need we anxiously cross out each day on the calendar with the fear that it may be our last or fear the grave because we will be no more. Rather a light has shown upon our hopes and fears, our anxieties and insecurities, freeing us from the tyranny of that sort of time to see, still hidden in flesh, the God who has time for us...eternally

“...my presence in Times Square that rainy morning,” concludes Brian Greene, “losing sleep to mark an arbitrary moment in the passage of what I truly believe to be a derivative concept—attests to the power of convention and experience. Regardless of our scientific insights,

we will still mourn the evanescence of life and be able to thrill to the arrival of each newly delivered moment. The choice, however, of whether to be fully seduced by the face nature reveals directly to our senses, or to also recognize the reality that exists beyond perception, is ours.” Though I would say more! Our presence on New Year’s Day in this sanctuary—losing sleep to mark the fullness of time toward which all the days of our lives were made to bend-- attests to the power of faith and hope. We will still mourn the evanescence of life and be able to thrill to the arrival of each newly delivered moment, because the reality that exists beyond perception has been revealed, in the fullness of time, in the face of Jesus Christ. In him, our eyes have seen our salvation! Happy New Year! Thanks be to God!